

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-19

NEW YORK TIMES
24 MAY 1982

ABROAD AT HOME

Poisoning The Well

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, May 23 — Last October President Reagan telephoned Morton I. Abramowitz, one of this country's top professional diplomats, and said: "You're my man for Indonesia." Last week the State Department announced that the appointment was being withdrawn — because the Indonesian Government would not accept Mr. Abramowitz as Ambassador.

What happened between those two events throws some unhappy light on the workings of the Reagan Administration. People who supposedly support the President produced a critique of Mr. Abramowitz spun from right-wing fantasy. They got this document into the White House, and then sent it to the Indonesian Government. The Administration, knowing about the poisonous process for six months, took no effective action to stop it.

That Morton Abramowitz should be the target of such internecine political warfare is grotesque. He is the archetype of the non-political foreign service officer. He has done significant work as an Asian policy expert under both Democratic and Republican administrations, in the State and Defense Departments as well as abroad.

He has not hesitated to disagree with political superiors on tough issues. After the fall of Vietnam in 1975 Henry Kissinger was ready to write off Thailand; Mr. Abramowitz argued successfully against such self-fulfilling gloom. He fought President Carter and Zbigniew Brzezinski on their plan, eventually abandoned, to withdraw American ground forces from South Korea.

From 1978 to the middle of 1981 he was Ambassador to Thailand, and there he had a personal impact unusual for ambassadors in an age of overseas telephones and flying foreign ministers. He was largely responsible for persuading a reluctant Thailand to accept hundreds of thousands of desperate Cambodians as refugees, and he also gave critical help to the Vietnamese boat people. These actions figured in his winning the President's Award for Distinguished Federal Service last year.

What, then, went wrong with the appointment to Indonesia? The answer appears to lie in extremist ideology and personal resentment.

The document that led to rejection of the appointment is headed "Point Paper on Morton Abramowitz" and is stamped Confidential. "Was the architect for U.S. troop withdrawal from Korea in 1977," it says in one passage: an indication of its accuracy and character. The paper says Mr. Abramowitz's wife, Sheppie, "worked on the staff of Muskie, McGovern and Carter;" she worked for about a year for Edmund Muskie when he was a Senator. In a ludicrous invention, it says Mr. Abramowitz told someone in Thailand, "I am a McGovernite." It says correctly that he is a friend of Richard Holbrooke, who as President Carter's able Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs was a *bête noir* of the extreme right.

This collection of garbage and guilt-by-association was slipped into the files of the White House personnel office last fall. Then a copy was somehow got to President Suharto of Indonesia, who was told that it was a White House memorandum indicating President Reagan's real views on Mr. Abramowitz.

President Suharto then sent word that he did not want Mr. Abramowitz. Secretary of State Haig twice told the Indonesian Foreign Minister that the Administration really liked Mr. Abramowitz, but he was told in reply that "the well has been poisoned." The Indonesians evidently decided that they were in the middle of an American Government dispute. No one — specifically not President Reagan — acted forcefully enough to disabuse them of that impression.

Who was responsible for the poisoned attack? No one signed it, and no one has taken responsibility. But a number of persons have been publicly identified as critics of Mr. Abramowitz.

One is Daniel C. Arnold, who was the C.I.A. station chief in Thailand while Mr. Abramowitz was Ambassador. When he retired and then came back to Bangkok as an agent of the Thai Government, Mr. Abramowitz reportedly told him that was not a good idea. Another critic is said to be Gen. Richard G. Stillwell, once commander of United States forces in South Korea, now a Deputy Under Secretary of Defense.

Who produced the document, who brought it to the White House and who got it to President Suharto are questions that should still be explored, perhaps by a Congressional committee. To carry internal political or personal differences secretly to a foreign government is not just venomous but subversive of the appointment process.

President Reagan recently had to tell one of his Texas backers to stop attacking his chief of staff, James Baker. The Abramowitz episode shows that the same zealotry in the ranks of his supposed supporters hurts the President in foreign affairs. The purveyors of hate and envy destroy professionalism.

Morton Abramowitz was the immediate victim, but nothing can stain his record as a fighter for American interests and a diplomat who saved thousands of lives. The losers in this affair are the President, the U.S. Foreign Service and the public.